

“We have an Ondas Award and a lot of anxiety”: Engagement strategies and parasociality of the *Estirando el chicle* podcast*

Lucía Caro Castaño
Lourdes Gallardo Hurtado

Universidad de Cádiz

lucia.caro@uca.es

lourdes.gallardo@uca.es



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Abstract

The *Estirando el chicle* [Stretching the chewing gum] audiovisual podcast is analyzed as a success story that focuses on the connection between the program and its social audiences to determine whether elements of parasociality exist. The case study method is used, with a mixed design that combines discourse analysis and content analysis to understand: 1) the discursive strategies used by the creators, searching for a co-orientation effect with their audience, and 2) whether fandom expresses the existence of parasociality on YouTube. The results show that the hosts use five strategies to be perceived as authentic and to connect with their audience: self-revelation, the “behind-the-scenes” narrative subgenre, visibility of mental health issues, rejection of the aspirational discourse of influencers, and the simulation of interaction. As regards signs of parasociality among the fandom, it is found that 63.8% of comments address the hosts with familiarity, 14.4% of the texts express affectivity belonging to the primary group, and the gratifications from the podcast obtained are entertainment (46.5%), the sense of belonging to the community (18.9%), self-expression (11%), identification (4.7%), and an improvement in some aspect of their life (4.7%).

Keywords: PSI; PSR; public relations; podcasting; fandom; YouTube

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Resum. «*Tenim un Ondas i molta ansietat*». *Estratègies de compromís i parasocialitat del pòdcast Estirando el chicle*

S'analiza el pòdcast audiovisual *Estirando el chicle* com a cas d'èxit parant esment en la connexió del programa amb les seves audiències socials per conèixer si existeixen elements de parasocialitat. S'empra el mètode de l'estudi de cas amb un disseny mixt que combina l'anàlisi del discurs i l'anàlisi de contingut per conèixer: 1) les estratègies discursives utilitzades per les creadores buscant un efecte de coorientació amb l'audiència i 2) si el *fandom* expressa a Youtube l'existència de parasocialitat. Els resultats mostren que les presentadores fan servir cinc estratègies per ser percebudes com a autèntiques i connectar amb les audiències: l'autorevelació, el subgènere narratiu «després de l'escena», la visibilitat de la salut mental, el rebuig al discurs aspiracional dels *influencers* i la simulació d'interacció. Quant als indicis de parasocialitat en el *fandom*, es va trobar que el 63,8% dels comentaris es dirigeix a les presentadores amb familiaritat, el 14,4% dels textos expressa una afectivitat pròpia del grup primari i les gratificacions que reconeixen obtenir del pòdcast són entreteniment (46,5%), pertinença a la comunitat (18,9%), autoexpressió (11%), identificació (4,7%) i la millora d'algun aspecte de la seva vida (4,7%).

Paraules clau: PSI; PSR; relacions públiques; podcàsting; *fandom*; YouTube

Resumen. «*Tenemos un Ondas y mucha ansiedad*». *Estrategias de compromiso y parasocialidad del pòdcast Estirando el chicle*

Se analiza el podcast audiovisual *Estirando el chicle* como caso de éxito prestando atención a la conexión del programa con sus audiencias sociales para conocer si existen elementos de parasocialidad. Se emplea el método del estudio de caso con un diseño mixto que combina el análisis del discurso y el análisis de contenido para conocer: 1) las estrategias discursivas usadas por las creadoras buscando un efecto de coorientación con la audiencia y 2) si el *fandom* expresa en Youtube la existencia de parasocialidad. Los resultados muestran que las presentadoras emplean cinco estrategias para ser percibidas como auténticas y conectar con las audiencias: la autorrevelación, el subgénero narrativo «tras la escena», la visibilidad de la salud mental, el rechazo al discurso aspiracional de los *influencers* y la simulación de interacción. En cuanto a los indicios de parasocialidad en el *fandom*, se encontró que el 63,8% de los comentarios se dirige a las presentadoras con familiaridad, el 14,4% de los textos expresa una afectividad propia del grupo primario y las gratificaciones que reconocen obtener del podcast son entretenimiento (46,5%), pertenencia a la comunidad (18,9%), autoexpresión (11%), identificación (4,7%) y la mejora de algún aspecto de su vida (4,7%).

Palabras clave: PSI; PSR; relaciones públicas; podcàsting; *fandom*; YouTube

1. Introduction and state of the art

This paper analyzes the *Estirando el chicle* (EEC) [Stretching the chewing gum] audiovisual podcast as a success story in creating a fan community that has helped turn a self-produced podcast launched in May 2020 into one of the most played podcasts of 2021 in Spain, and winner of Best Podcast at the 2021 Ondas Awards (Casares, 2021). The podcast's narrative strategies and the use of YouTube's communicative possibilities, which facilitate parasocial

relationships and interactions (hereinafter PSRs and PSIs), are described. Likewise, the way its fans communicate on YouTube is analyzed to understand what type of gratifications are found in the podcast and whether there are signs of PSIs and PSRs in their comments.

1.1. Engagement and parasociality in maintaining public relations

Building and maintaining co-oriented relationships between an organization and its audiences of interest is one of the essential components of professionally maintaining public relations (Castillo, 2009; Lane and Kent, 2018). The emergence of social media platforms in the media environment caused many authors to view them as the obvious choice for making the dialogic nature of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations a reality (Van Ruler, 2015; Xifra and Grau, 2010). As Shoai (2020) indicates, however, the connection between dialogue and technology hardly seems to have fulfilled its potential, since many professionals have interpreted the idea of engagement as more of a discourse than a dialogue, and have failed to focus on true co-orientation. Other papers show that little involvement in online dialogue is detected in areas where it could be assumed that there is a more dialogic attitude, such as activism (Sá, 2020) or a public administration-citizen relationship (Marcos-García, Doménech-Fabregat and Casero-Ripollés, 2021).

In this context, some authors notice how organizations, business leaders and celebrities communicate with their audiences by promoting the appearance of parasocial interactions and relationships (Caro-Castaño, 2015; Coombs and Holladay, 2015; Tsai and Men, 2017). The term was coined by Horton and Wohl (2006/1956) to refer to the illusion of reciprocal interaction which audience members experience towards figures in the media. In the field of public relations, these interactions are considered to be parasocial interactions when dialogue and mutual orientation are replaced by communicative strategies that simulate face-to-face interaction and seek to produce an illusion of proximity and authenticity.

In terms of the expectations of audience interaction, the evolution of social media should be reviewed, from an initial phase when it was used to manage one's network of contacts, to a later stage when it became a space focused on content consumption (Ellison and Boyd, 2013). In the case of YouTube, Khan (2017) observes the notion of engagement with an active dimension (uploading a video, publishing a comment, using the “like” button), as well as with a passive dimension (watching a video, reading comments), the latter being more common and directly connected to the main gratification of YouTube: entertainment and escape (Khan, 2017). Thus, Lacalle, Gómez-Morales and Narvaiza (2021) explain in their study on the fandom of fiction series in Spain that these users showed more interest in using characters and plot lines to express things about themselves than in interacting with other fans, observing how the dialogic expectation of users would have

decreased in favor of more passive behavior. In this regard, this paper asks (RQ1): What discursive strategies are developed by EEC's creators to generate engagement among its fandom on YouTube?

1.2. Parasocial interactions and relationships in the fandom

Digital platforms offer a hybrid space where a figure in the media shows their private life in a public way, expressing themselves authentically and maintaining a level of intimacy through emotional work (Marwick, 2015). As Rosaen and Dibble (2017) explain, the more genuine they appear to their audience and the greater their similarity to real people, the greater the chance that PSIs and PSRs occur. Self-revelation enhances the spectator's feeling of having a relationship similar to the relationship that they would have with members of their inner circles. Greater empathy for the public figure, as well as for the members of the community, is thus developed (Preece and Ghozati, 2001). This parasociality stems, in part, from the process of identification, in which the fan establishes a relationship of similarity between the figure in the media and themselves, and the process of projection, in which the fan projects their wishes, attitudes or prejudices on the figure (Macé, 1997). The study by Thelwall et al. (2022), which proposes analyzing user comments that address figures in the media using the pronoun "you" as an indicator of potential PSI, is useful because this pronoun expresses a stronger interaction. Likewise, the authors propose the concept of "semi-PSI" to differentiate an imaginary interaction from new interactions that are allowed by social media platforms and are real but do not guarantee that the information actually reaches the recipient.

Under the perspective of the uses and gratifications theory, several authors view PSRs as a compensatory relationship. With these PSRs, the aim is to meet social needs (Éscalas and Bettman, 2017) with celebrities and, more specifically, with microcelebrities (Hwang and Zhang, 2018) who appear to be more accessible. The narrowing gap between said figures and fans (Marwick, 2015), however, leads to parasocial interactions and relationships that are complementary in nature. In this context, there is reason to believe that for the fan this parasocial relationship is experienced as an extension (Lacalle et al., 2021) rather than a behavior that compensates for the deficiencies in their social relationships. Interactions and relationships of this type fulfill information needs, emotional needs, needs for social integration and needs for entertainment and escape (Phua, Jin and Kim, 2017), without implying that in-person experiences will be replaced.

The following research questions are thus formulated: (RQ2) What type of gratifications and relationships are observed in the comments of fans of the podcast on YouTube? (RQ3) Are there elements that indicate parasociality in their communication?

1.3. Engagement and parasocial relationships as key elements of podcasting

Podcasts constitute the ideal space for establishing parasocial relationships (Perks and Turner, 2019) thanks to their ability to be integrated in the life of the listener (Perks, Turner and Tollison, 2019), the fact that they are presented as a highly personal and authentic media source (Marx et al., 2021), and due to their niche nature (Marx et al., 2021). The fact that the podcaster shares personal content is a key element, one which affects the listener's experience and the construction of parasociality (Perks and Turner, 2019; Marx et al., 2021). Indeed, this intimacy is enhanced when the listener employs headphones for podcast consumption, as it results in a greater sense of privacy and intimacy, as well as a deeply personal space (Berry, 2016). Accordingly, Perks and Turner (2019) observe that the gratifications obtained by the listener when listening to the podcast are cognitive in nature, involve social integration, or provide entertainment, among others. Some gratifications include listening to podcasts as a way of multi-tasking with other activities, as a way of making connections with other people, feeling part of a conversation, or recommending engaging content as a means of self-affirmation and building one's identity (Perks and Turner, 2019; Perks et al., 2019). Therefore, although listening to podcasts is presented as a solitary activity, it offers a series of gratifications related to connecting with other listeners or with the host (Perks et al., 2019).

Aroesti (2021) explains that the increase in podcast consumption and, as a result, PSR constructions rose during the COVID-19 lockdown period. According to the author, there were times when listening to podcasts led to such a feeling of intimacy that these relationships even began to replace the very intimacy of relationships in one's primary circle, the first relationship being one that was not as significant or profound as the second. Likewise, during lockdown, contact between friends and family was mediated by technology, thus causing the lines between the relationship with podcasters and friends to become blurred.

The following research questions are thus formulated: (RQ4) Do EEC's creators use the communicative potential of the medium (YouTube) to generate engagement and parasociality? (RQ5) How did the situation of lockdown affect podcast production and its consumption?

2. Objectives and methodology

The main objective of this paper is to understand the keys to the success of the *Estirando el Chicle* podcast (Iglesias and Martín, 2020-present), focusing on the connection between the program and its creators and its social audiences to determine whether elements of parasociality exist. The following specific objectives are therefore defined:

SO1. Describe the content of the podcast and the type of discursive strategies used by its creators to simulate co-orientation with the public.

SO2. Understand the communication with which its fandom engages with the program on YouTube and whether signs of parasociality can be inferred from their comments.

To achieve this, the case study method is used, with a mixed design that combines discourse analysis and content analysis. Discourse analysis is used as a central technique based on a corpus of 60 podcasts – the first four seasons up to episode 4x15. In the first phase of fieldwork, the researchers watched all 60 podcasts to define the conceptual categories of the study, following the proposal of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). Based on these categories, and now in the second phase, 11 episodes were viewed again to transcribe and code them. For convenience, the selection criterion was chosen for seven units of analysis, where the first and last episode of each season was used to see how the hosts introduce themselves and bid farewell to the public, understanding that these moments are particularly important when it comes to establishing and maintaining their relationship with the fandom; and four episodes were randomly chosen from a table of random numbers. Coding was carried out using Nvivo 12 software.

In the third phase, comments by EEC followers on YouTube were taken into consideration to understand the fandom's response. These were analyzed using both discourse analysis and content analysis (Krippendorf, 2004) to measure the extent to which certain factors indicating parasociality were present: whether the person directs their message at the creators (the use of "you", Thelwall et al., 2022), the use of affective language belonging to the primary group, or the recognition of gratifications and relationships that go beyond entertainment. The main conceptual categories were operationalized in variables for this second technique and an *ad hoc* codebook was developed (Table 1). Coding was carried out on 660 comments made by followers on the 11 episodes studied. At the time the data was manually collected, these episodes had 5,136 comments, meaning that 13% of the universe has been analyzed.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Estirando el chicle *as a success story*

EEC ranked as one of the most played podcasts in Spain in 2021 (Ovelar, 2022). The hosts, Carolina Iglesias and Victoria Martín, have experience as professional comedians and launched their web series *Válidas* [*Valid*] (Iglesias, Martín and Pardo, 2020) on YouTube in March 2020 (Ovelar, 2022). After the series ended and during the nationwide lockdown period caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, they launched EEC in May 2020 (Ovelar, 2022). The podcast is presented as a conversation between friends, either between the hosts and collaborators or with guests to the program. They discuss topics relating to feminism and mental health, and personal anecdotes. The podcast is broadcast weekly on YouTube and on platforms such as Spotify, iVox and Apple Podcast.

Table 1. Codebook

Variables	Categories
Episode	
Comment text	
Comment no.	
Nickname	
Comment length	
No. of “likes” received	
No. of “dislikes” received	
No. of comments received	None, between 1 and 5, between 6 and 10, more than 10.
Gender identity	Female, male, unidentifiable.
Use of emojis	Yes/No.
Emotion expressed by the emoji	Positive, negative, other.
To whom the message is directed	Not directed to anyone in particular, directed to the podcast’s hosts, directed to another member of the community, other.
Main topic of the comment	Comment about the host(s), the interviewee(s), the podcast or other works related to the EEC universe, program consumption, mental health, feminism, biographical comment about the user, loneliness, other topics.
The comment refers to the EEC universe	Yes/No.
The person expresses what gratification EEC gives them	They identify with one of the hosts or with the experiences described by the hosts (identification); they feel accompanied or part of a community (belonging); they celebrate the podcast’s success or feel like a collaborator (projection); they express something about their identity based on the podcast (self-expression); they praise the entertainment that it provides (entertainment); the podcast improves their perception of their own physical and mental conditions; the podcast or the discourse of the hosts have inspired them or helped them improve some aspect of their life; they recognize that following the podcast has reduced their prejudices about other groups (other races, other sexual orientations, etc.); not perceived.
The person expresses more affectivity belonging to the primary group.	Yes/No.
The program or the hosts interact with the comment	They do not interact, they give a “like”, they comment.

Source: Created by authors based on Lacalle et al. (2021) and Hoffner and Bond (2022).

The podcast began as a self-produced program, broadcast from an amateur home environment (Ovelar, 2022). Given the limited resources available, they used the Patreon platform to make it easier for their fandom to make microdonations and thus contribute to the show’s development. Following its remarkable success, the second season was broadcast from the Cadena SER studios and produced by Podium Podcast. After this, *Estirando el Chicle LIVE* was created, a show bringing the virtual stage to the physical

plane in theaters throughout Spain, and selling out its 12,000 tickets for the Wizink Center in just 17 hours (Ovelar, 2022). This was the first non-musical show to do so, something unheard of for comedians and specifically unheard of for women. Moreover, at the 2021 Ondas Awards it won the award for “Best Podcast” (Casares, 2021).

3.2. *Discourse on authenticity in EEC*

Qualitative coding of the videos established three major conceptual categories that encompass the focus and content of EEC. Figure 1 provides a summary, indicating textual examples from the podcast and the feedback that they receive from the fandom in comments on the videos. Due to how frequently it is found, as well as the strategies used to convey it, the most important category is authenticity, which is consistent with the characteristics of the podcast format (Swiatek, 2018; Marx et al., 2021) and with celebrity culture in social media (Marwick, 2015). Below, the main strategies for connecting with the audience that were observed, as well as the characteristics that define EEC’s identity and narrative universe, are reviewed.

3.2.1. *Self-revelation of private life*

Self-revelation is a strategic decision to create the social identity that is characteristic of celebrity culture: celebrities reveal facts about their private life in the media because consumer society views privacy as an indicator of authenticity (Marshall, 1998). In this vein, Iglesias and Martín tell personal stories that address intimate taboo topics, such as mental health, sexual relations or addiction. Likewise, since the podcast began during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown period, the first season took place in private intimate spaces: Martín’s living room, Iglesias’s bedroom, and the Martín’s parents’ backyard, which they moved to when the restrictions on movement allowed them to do so (Figure 1). Access to these scenes is highly symbolic for many fans:

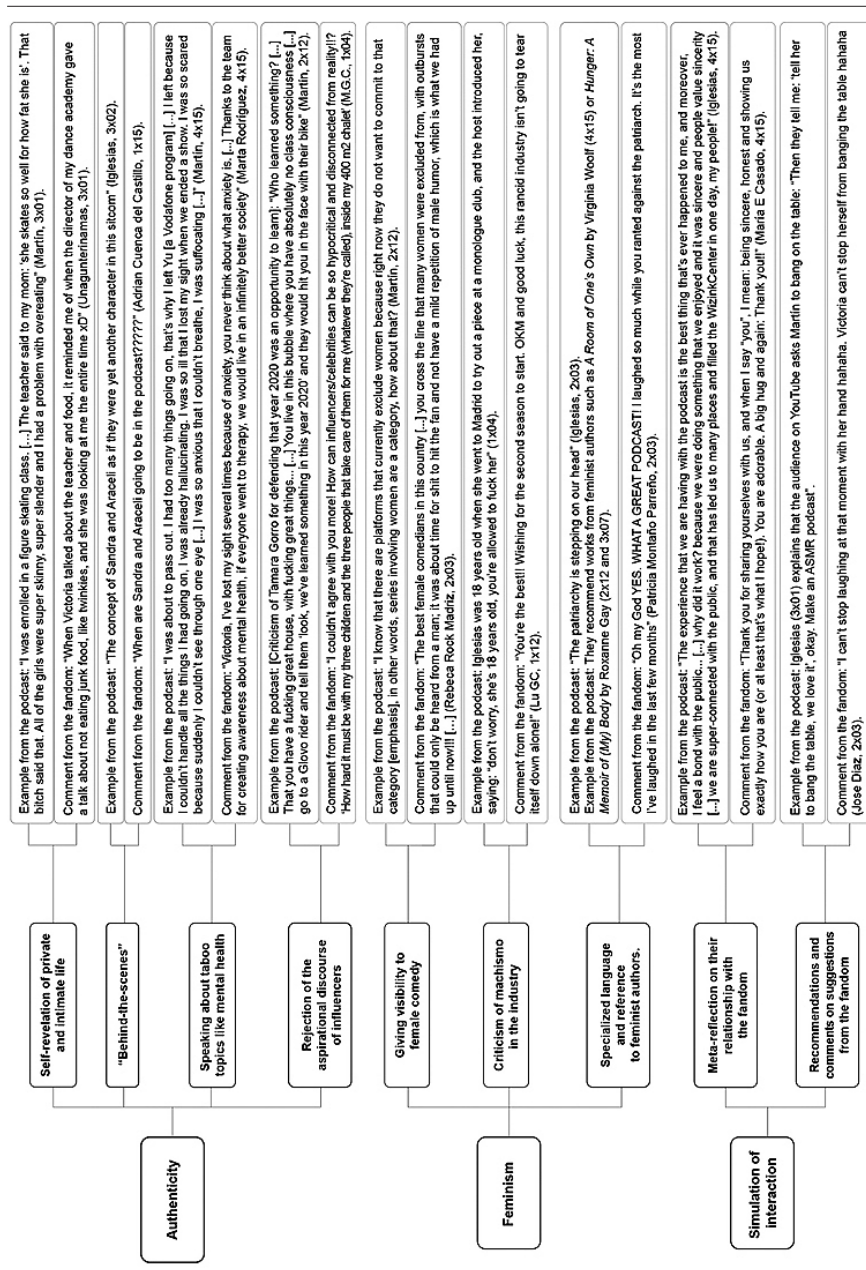
This program is the emotional accumulation of a journey that started in Victoria’s parents’ backyard and that represents an entire generation. (Cdelia chuchuchu, 4x15)

The drying rack at Martín’s parent’s home, for example, is something that the program has kept, incorporating it into its corporate visual identity. Moreover, many comments from the first season communicate appreciation for the existence of the program during lockdown:

This podcast and Válidas have kept me sane throughout quarantine [...] (Paloma Castro, 1x15)

[...] They are my saviors from quarantine [...] (Milagros Ríos, 3x01).

Figure 1. Conceptual categories



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 2. Screenshots of private intimate scenes from the first season

Source: YouTube (<<https://bit.ly/37dBxU1>>, <<https://bit.ly/3j08ki3>>).

The feeling that the podcast creates among its followers is one that makes them feel as if they are part of a private conversation between two friends, as Aida Addrissi explained (4x15):

I spent the whole time smiling [...]. I love this section of you two without a guest, it was really great because it's just the two of you talking about self-esteem and anxiety. Thank you so much for the program, I feel like I'm sitting with two friends, the best friends in the world [...].

Decisions about how the program will run in upcoming seasons add to this feeling of shared intimacy, decisions such as asking guests to bring their own panties to the podcast as an intimate element that can be related to the joke involving Martín's parent's drying rack.

3.2.2. Use of the “behind-the-scenes” subgenre

One common strategy involves the use of the “behind-the-scenes” narrative subgenre, in which elements remaining outside the frame, literally and figuratively, are shared with the spectator, helping to generate a feeling of shared intimacy. Thus, regular viewers know the names of the program's entire production team and the relationships between them.

The audience know the people who are part of the hosts' private sphere, despite having never seen them, since the hosts talk about experiences with these people, such as Sandra and Araceli, whom Martín mentions often as her only two childhood friends. Iglesias's mother has also been mentioned on the podcast several times, even appearing in a scene via a private WhatsApp voice message (3x07). The verism achieved by the podcast is such that that a fan pointed out the difficulty in distinguishing reality from fiction, as noted in the following comment (1x01):

[Nine !]: I don't know how to tell Victoria's character from the real Victoria, help!!! Hahahaha.

[Carolina Iglesias (Percebesygrelos)]: It's a trick: SHE'S THE SAME THE ENTIRE TIME.

The “behind-the-scenes” element is also used in relation to brands and possible sponsors. Several coded episodes contain references to brands that they would like to collaborate with or with which they have had contact, even mentioning that the brand wasn’t interested and making jokes with insults (2x12). All of this therefore creates a sense of access to what Goffman (1999) termed the backstage of social interaction, the area that could only be accessed by equals and where it is assumed that the subject leaves their stage persona and can exit the frame of what is politically correct.

3.2.3. *Mental health awareness*

Both hosts explain the importance of seeing a psychologist, and they recommend that their viewers take care of this aspect in seven of the eleven episodes coded. The last episode studied (“Es para reflexionar” [*Something to reflect on*], 4x15) specifically focuses on talking about the mental problems that both hosts faced prior to their success in the final months of 2021.

Mental health awareness is so present in the podcast that it is directly related to the hosts’ type of humor, as can be observed in this excerpt with Martín and a collaborator:

Lala Chus: If we didn’t suffer from anxiety, do you think we would be different, that we would make a different program? Or do you think that anxiety made us create this type of content?

Victoria Martín: For me, it’s the driving force.

Discussing these issues with candidness and humor is an aspect that, while not among the main topics addressed by the fandom – it is only 3.5% of the sample (see graph 1) –, it is a topic that many fans identify with:

Oh, I understand overeating, when I was a child this never happened to me but now it does. After eating a lot, I feel guilty :((Brisas, 3x01)

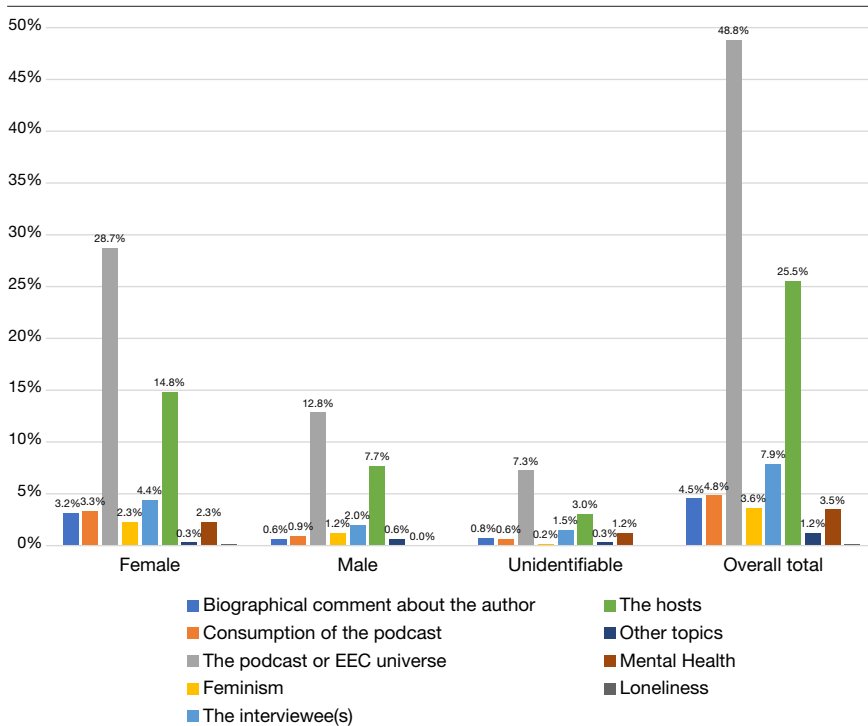
3.2.4. *Rejection of aspirational discourse*

Another strategy to connect with the fandom is the criticism of the aspirational discourse of influencers (Duffy, 2017):

Super famous people who want to show how authentic they are all the time really piss me off. (Martín, 3x01)

This rejection is supported by constantly expressing their own miseries in the least favorable way possible for their reputations, one of the key aspects of their comedy. This way of presenting themselves makes it easier for the community to connect with the hosts and identify with them:

Thank you so much for talking about topics [...] that are completely avoided on social media or are made to seem as if everything is wonderful. (Raquii, 3x07)

Graph 1. Distribution of comment topics based on gender

Source: Own elaboration.

I identified with this 100%. You represent an entire generation, girls. (Olga Roig, 3x07)

There is recognition of something that is non-strategic and unenviable about their own lives and their careers in comedy. This can be observed in their careless relationship with brands or the fact that they acknowledge the financial element of this relationship compared to the emotional discourse that influencers use to recommend brands. It can also be seen in how they call on their own followers, constantly using direct foul language, which contrasts with the friendly language used by influencers:

People are bastards [...]. People haven't shared the series like they should have and it's all your fault. (Martín, 1x01)

Moreover, it is observed how they insist on their own condition as non-famous, ordinary people (Rosaen and Dibble, 2017) and show the precariousness of their own employment situation. Thus, they explained their response

to their surroundings when interviewed by the program *Late Motiv* (Movistar+, 2016-2021):

People were really excited because for them we’re like two drifters. [...] Every time a door opens for us somewhere, people celebrate it. (Iglesias, 3x18)

3.2.5. *Simulation of interaction*

The hosts seek to engage with and give visibility to fans in EEC, carrying out actions that simulate co-orientation with the public, since it is impossible to establish a true relationship with each fan due to time constraints. This simulation is distinguished, on one hand, by how they call on the audience by giving recommendations in episodes:

Treat people well because they are people... and if the other person is disgusting, well, then treat them badly. (Martín, 1x04)

And also when they refer to the community following comments made, in the proposals they offer as a way of giving thanks:

Our audience is the best audience in the whole wide world. (Iglesias, 4x01)

An example of this is when they engage with the audience, asking what to do with the underwear brought by guests to the program. Laura Tomás Pujol (3x18) answers:

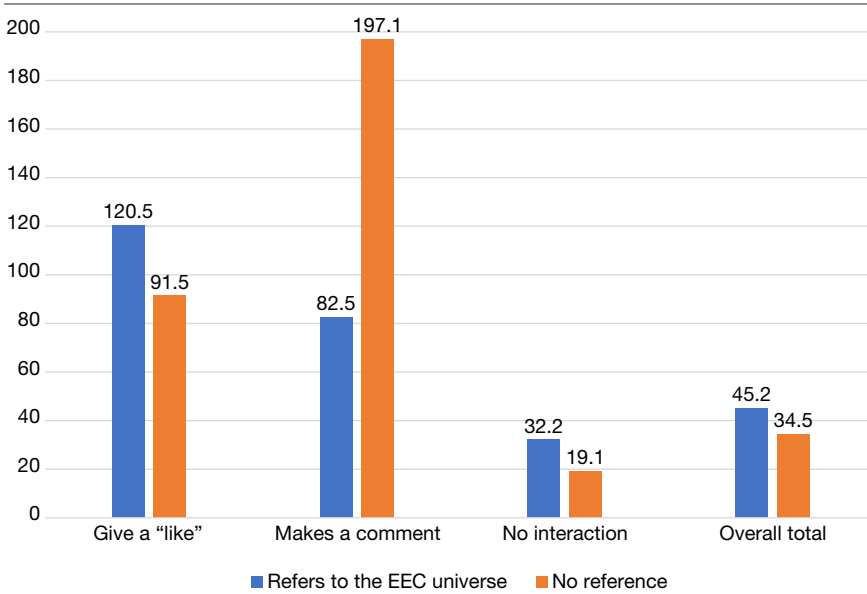
Hopefully next season the set will be full of framed underwear, kind of like the Hard Rock Café, with a golden plaque [...]

At the beginning of the following season, Iglesias (4x01) answers the proposals suggested by the public:

What will we do with the panties that we removed from there? No idea. [...] Only crazy people give ideas like the ones we’re receiving.

On the other hand, this simulation is developed through the program’s interaction with YouTube comments. Graph 2 shows that, of the overall total, the comments that are most talked-about by the program and by the fandom refer to the EEC universe, attracting a higher average number of “likes” compared to comments that do not mention it – an average of 45.2 compared to 34.5. Thus, the existence of program interaction is observed, in addition to how the fandom rewards this participation with many “likes” as a way of recognizing fans and the hosts (Preece and Ghazati, 2001) and as a way of feeling involved in the interaction; this is consistent with the results of other research (Tsai and Men, 2017; Perks et al., 2019).

Graph 2. Average number of “likes” based on the interaction the comment receives from the program and if it refers to the EEC universe



Source: Own elaboration.

3.3. *The feminist claim*

Feminism appears to be the “natural” perspective from which the topics of the podcast are analyzed, both when talking about personal experiences and when referring to the profession. Iglesias (2x12) explains her “hatred” towards the fact that the traditional industry considers series led by women to be intended for a single target, as if the fact that the protagonist is female already defines a genre in and of itself. Confronted with this situation where femininity is considered a market niche, Iglesias and Martín assert that their comedy is not only intended for women. In this vein, if the gender identity expressed by those who comment on their videos is analyzed, a female majority is observed: 59.3% female compared to 25.8% male and 14.8% unidentifiable.

To help increase the visibility of female comedy, starting in the fourth season they started to incorporate different Spanish female comedians as program collaborators. Likewise, as of the third season, the podcast’s format changed and it started to incorporate interviews with female public figures, with the only exception being fellow comedian Iggi Rubin (2x05), the only man invited to talk about clichés regarding male-female friendships.

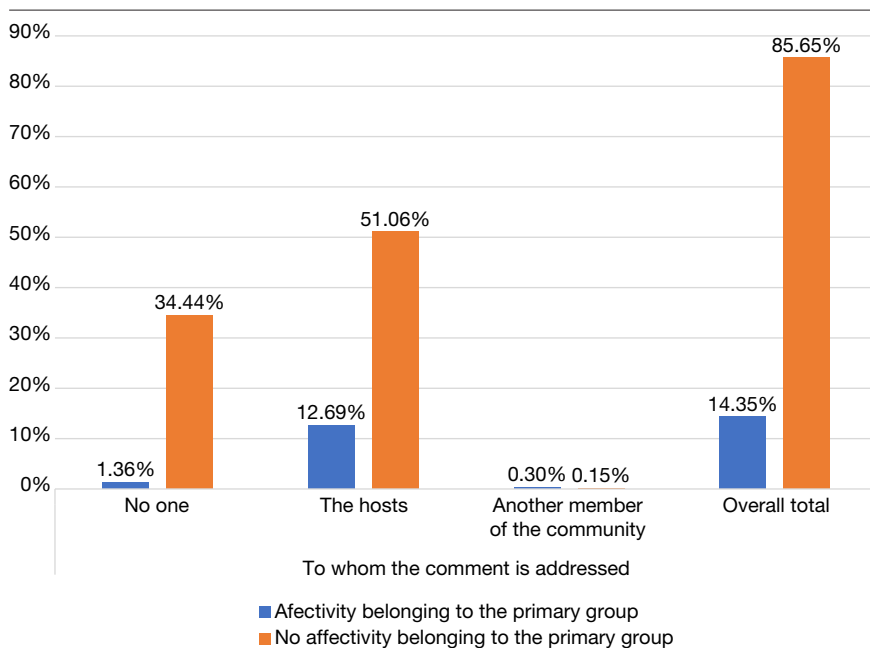
Another characteristic feature of the program is the use of its own terminology for feminist theory, such as references to the patriarchy, intersectionality or the commitment to trans-inclusive language – “Bienvenidas, bien-

venidos, bienvenidos” in Spanish [*Welcome* in English, using female, male and non-specific endings] is how Iglesias typically greets listeners. In spite of this, feminism was the main topic of only 3.6% of the comments analyzed (graph 1).

3.4. Gratifications, parasociality and engagement

The results from the content analysis reveal strong parasocial potential, in accordance with the proposal by Thelwall et al. (2022). 63.8% of the comments analyzed were directed at the hosts, using “you”, compared to 35.8% of the comments that weren’t intended for anyone specifically. In graph 3, two variables that would indicate a higher degree of parasociality by the fans are shown: the expression of affectivity belonging to the primary group and the fact that the podcast’s creators are directly addressed.

Graph 3. Distribution of comments based on who is speaking and the affectivity that they express



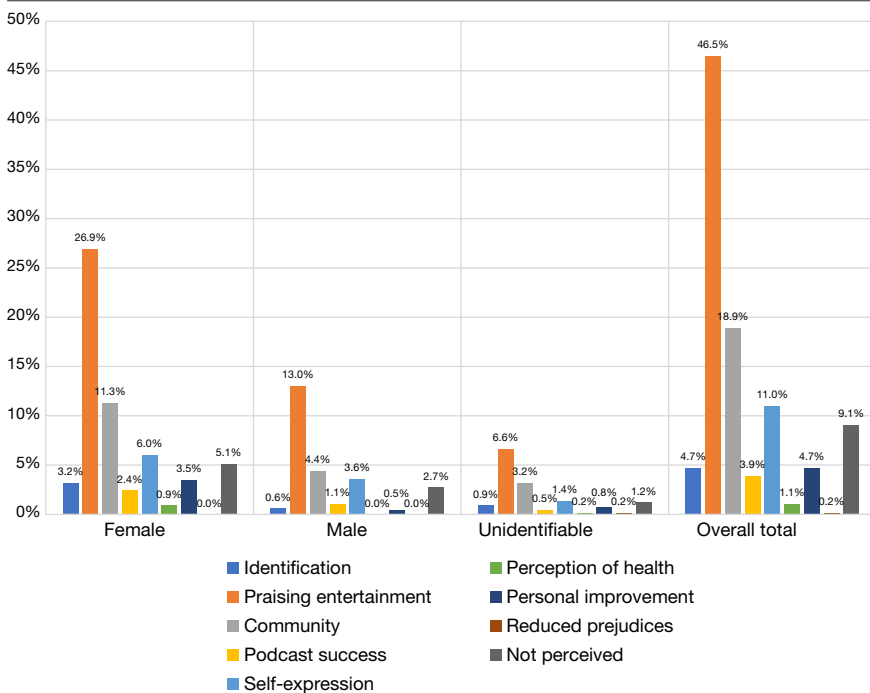
Source: Own elaboration.

14.4% of the comments express this type of intimate affectivity, with 12.7% focusing on addressing the comedians, to whom they project a feeling of shared intimacy that translates into gratification with deep emotional meaning, as expressed by user Carlos PJ (1x15):

[...] You are the type of people that I would love the world to be full of. [...] Thank you for filling my heart with wonderful things during a very difficult time in my life.

In general, and in line with the absence of “dislikes”, the emojis used in the comments are positive in nature (86.5%).

Graph 4. Distribution of gratifications based on gender and the average number of “likes”



Source: Own elaboration.

Graph 4 shows the gratifications expressed by the fandom, where entertainment is the main gratification (46.5%), which is expected since it is a comedy podcast, and this is consistent with the results of other studies on YouTube (Khan, 2017). The second gratification is the feeling of belonging to a community (18.9%), followed by self-expression (11%). 4.7% of fans indicate that they identify with the narrative of the podcast and another 4.7% explain that the podcast has helped them improve their life, the latter taking into account one of the benefits that PSI and PSR can offer audiences (Hoffner and Bond, 2022).

Although the user is aware of the parasocial nature of experiences of this type, they experience them equally as real and significant:

I turned this podcast on in the background while I worked and during that time: I laughed, I cried, I felt identified and I felt very proud of three people that I don't know. Thank you so much. (Cristina Torres Ramirez, 4x15)

This comment demonstrates the active dimension of audiences when it comes to getting involved with content that engages them emotionally, and it reflects how the affordances of social media offer new possibilities of symbolic co-orientation and involvement among users, brands and public figures (Caro-Castaño, 2015; Tsai and Men, 2017).

4. Conclusions

The results of the analysis show that the success of the EEC podcast lies in the ability of its creators to develop a cultural product that easily assumes a feminist perspective and creates comedy from the self-revelation of the private and intimate lives of its creators. It creates the feeling of being part of a conversation between two friends who share their stories about a specific topic in each program. With regards to the discursive strategies developed to generate engagement among its fandom on YouTube (RQ1), the following strategies are found:

- a) The narration of private and intimate personal anecdotes using informal and often vulgar language, which helps transmit a feeling of proximity and trust.
- b) The use of the “behind-the-scenes” narrative subgenre, which encourages audiences to become involved with EEC beyond simply listening to it, by learning about the production team, the personal relationships among them, the difficulties of self-producing the podcast during the pandemic, etc.
- c) Awareness of the importance of mental health by bringing their own problems to light, which reflects the message of proximity and veracity through vulnerability.
- d) Rejection of the aspirational discourse of celebrities and influencers. Offering their intimacy and opinions without trying to show a perfect and enviable life makes it easier for the fandom to identify and connect with them.
- e) Use of the communicative affordances of YouTube to simulate co-orientation with the audience by means of making recommendations in the podcasts and directly interacting through comments and “likes” on the comments of the fandom. These actions generate the feeling of presence and feedback from the podcasters and give visibility to fans within the EEC universe. Thus, RQ4 is also answered.

Starting the podcast in the midst of the COVID-19 lockdown period meant that the first season took place completely in the private spaces of the

hosts and their family members. This generated anecdotes and elements that were highly symbolic for the fandom, while also providing them with greater opportunities for consuming content that led many to find help in the podcast to get through the lockdown period (RQ5).

With regards to the relationships and gratifications expressed by the fandom (RQ2), entertainment accounts for nearly half of the comments (46.5%), followed by belonging to a community (18.9%) and self-expression (11%). Lastly, indicators of parasociality in the fandom have been detected (RQ3): 63.75% of the comments analyzed directly addressed the hosts using “you”, while at the same time a small but significant portion (14.35%) expressed affectivity belonging to the primary group in their comments.

These conclusions point to the advantages of studying parasociality as a growing aspect of the gratifications and engagement that may occur among users, brands and public figures in social media. In this sense, it is recommended that future research further analyze how new forms of consumption and interaction enabled by these platforms, and the strategies of authenticity developed by the hosts of this kind of content, foster the emergence of new, significant experiences (both social and parasocial) among audiences. In the same vein, it would be useful to investigate the opportunities that the digital context and these types of authenticity strategies offer for brands and organizations to connect with their stakeholders.

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